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C O N F I D E N T I A L HARARE 000634

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV ZI MDC

SUBJECT: POLICE, MILITARY SEIZE OPPOSITION MP'S FARM

Classified By: Political Officer Win Dayton under Section 1.5 B/D

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The seizure of MDC MP Roy Bennett's Chimanimani farm by police and military on April 9 represents the climax of a long-standing GOZ effort to deprive the prominent opposition figure of his economic and political base. The forces evicted farm management from the property and gave remaining workers the option of leaving by April 14 or staying on to work for the farm's new operator -- Zimbabwe Defense Industries ("ZDI", a company recently added to the USG's financial sanctions list). Bennett's lawyers plan to carry the battle to the courts but hold out little hope of restoring the status quo ante, even with a favorable court order. Press reports of security forces assaulting farm workers in connection with the seizure appear to be inaccurate. END SUMMARY

2. (SBU) At about 4:00 a.m. on April 9 approximately 30 police personnel and 30 military personnel, all heavily armed, entered opposition MP Roy Bennett's "Charleswood Estate" farm and sealed all the property's access points. Lawyers representing the farm told police that the forces evicted six farm managers and an unspecified number of Bennett supporters from the farm; all now are safely lodged in Mutare as internally displaced persons. Bennett was out of the country at the time of the seizure. Contradicting press reports, the lawyers said there had been no violence associated with the takeover. Security forces, which had maintained a small encampment at the farm's edge since more than a year ago, now control the farm fully.

3. (SBU) The lawyers advised that the six ejected managers and the farm's corporate entity would seek legal relief restoring the status quo ante at the farm. However, security forces at the farm told farm representatives that they were under direct orders from Manicaland Governor (and ex-Brigadier General) Mike Nyambuya and the President himself in seizing the farm and that any countermanning court order would be "meaningless." Indeed, the seizure appears to fly in the face of a provisional high court order issued in February barring police from interfering with farm operations.

4. (SBU) Charleswood Estate has been the scene of tense and sometimes violent standoffs since the GOZ began its efforts to take the farm more than two years ago. Earlier this year a farm worker at Charleswood was shot fatally by security forces, according to witnesses, although the GOZ's official version had the victim "shot accidentally while trying to disarm military personnel." Bennett's farm houses more than 1,000 workers and family members and supports a host of other businesses and suppliers in the area. Many workers and residents of the area are fiercely loyal to Bennett, an outspoken opposition leader who is one of three white MPs. Nyambuya reportedly declared publicly last month that Bennett would not qualify for re-election as MP for Chimanimani if he did not live there. Indeed, according to Bennett's lawyers, the army major who led the operation and who is now occupying Bennett's house told farm residents that he will be the district's next MP.

5. (C) COMMENT: A significant financier at the center of the opposition's low-profile security apparatus, Bennett has long been the ruling party's bete noir in Manicaland. That control of the militant MP's farm passed so easily after two years of staunch resistance bears testament to a waning fighting spirit even in the party's more spirited wings. Bennett's ejection, which reportedly was one of new Governor Nyambuya's principal charges on taking office, may adversely affect the MDC's prospects to retain his parliamentary seat in the generally pro-opposition province. The passing of Charleswood's possession is not a watershed event so much as the latest manifestation of several well-established trends in Zimbabwe: erosion of the opposition's declining economic and political base by whatever force or tactics the ruling party deems necessary; the military's growing profile in ruling party machinations; and the increasing irrelevance of a largely impotent judiciary.
SULLIVAN